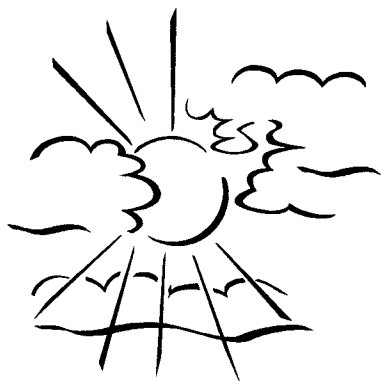


***Department
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Articles in Today's Clips

Monday, May 15, 2006

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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WAYNE COUNTY

Child abuse task force has little impact

Detroit has more cases, but its council funds are scant compared to suburbs

May 15, 2006

BY JACK KRESNAK
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Michigan's Children's Trust Fund, which recently discovered it has an additional \$70,000 to help prevent child maltreatment this year, is set to increase its meager annual contribution to the Detroit-based Mayor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect.

The task force, a voluntary collaboration of agencies trying to prevent mistreatment of children, is one of 71 child abuse and neglect prevention councils around the state funded mostly by voluntary contributions through a check-off on state income tax returns.

But the task force -- which covers Detroit, Highland Park, Hamtramck, Harper Woods and the Grosse Pointes -- has had little impact on reducing child neglect and abuse in an area with a significant population of children in poor families.

Created under former Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh in 1963, the task force is an all-volunteer organization with an annual budget of just \$7,500, two-thirds of which comes from an annual \$5,000 grant from the Children's Trust Fund.

This year, the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Oakland County received \$64,576 from the Children's Trust Fund, and the Macomb County Child Advocacy Center received \$27,401. Child's Hope in western Wayne County received \$43,102.

The budgets of the suburban councils also are much larger than that of the Mayor's Task Force -- \$1.3 million in Oakland, \$665,000 in Macomb and \$151,000 in western Wayne County.

Richard Bearup, who became executive director of the fund in January, said last week that there should be more equity between what Detroit's task force receives from the fund and what its better-established suburban neighbors get.

"These are things that our board of directors is interested in," Bearup said. "They want to see more fairness. They want to see more participation, more prevention and they want to see prevention applied where the need is the greatest."

The money has been distributed using a formula based on how many taxpayers in each county donated to the trust fund.

Bearup said the board would meet within two weeks to distribute the additional \$70,000, raised from donations made by taxpayers' 2005 income tax returns, and he would push for some of that money to go to Detroit.

Carole Jasper Quarterman, director of the Child Care Coordinating Council in Detroit and the volunteer chairperson of the Mayor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, said she hopes the group can become more active.

"There's a lot that we need to do," Quarterman said.

The Oakland and Macomb councils provide services such as forensic interviewing of children in suspected abuse cases, home visits to new mothers by nurses, individual and group family counseling, and education to social workers, police officers and others involved in the child protection system.

In Detroit and Wayne County, the state Department of Human Services pays for such programs through private agencies and other groups. This year, the state plans to spend about \$7.4 million on child abuse prevention in Wayne County.

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MICHIGAN

AMBER ALERT: 5-year-old girl last seen in Monroe

May 14, 2006

Detroit Free Press

The Monroe Police Department issued an Amber Alert Saturday evening for a five-year-old girl who authorities believe was kidnapped by her estranged father.

Devin Sierra Powell, of Rockwood, was last seen with her father, 28-year-old Jimmy Wayne Powell of Monroe, said Monroe Police Lt. Barclay Stewart.

The girl's mother, Jodie Breeding, of Rockwood, has full custody of the little girl and the told police Powell recently requested visitation. She said he had Devin since Wednesday and made arrangements with her to pick the child up at his home in the 700 block of East Second Street. Powell was not present when she went to pick up the girl.

When police went to the home, Powell's girlfriend told them that he left the residence at 3:45 p.m. and said he was taking Devin to McDonald's before he went to work at Automotive Holdings in Monroe. He borrowed her silver, 1998 Pontiac Bonneville and had never returned or reported to work. The license plate number on the car is ACD-3837.

Barclay said police believe Powell is somewhere in the Detroit area and may have a narcotics problem.

"Her mother is anxiously awaiting the return of her child," Stewart said. "We are doing everything we possibly can to make sure it happens."

Police ask anyone with information to contact the Monroe Police Department at 734-241-3300.

By Stan Donaldson

Protecting children a priority, despite budget woes

Saturday, May 13, 2006

By Bill Hardiman

Special To The Press

Perhaps the most important function of government is the protection of its citizens; especially it's most vulnerable citizens. Hubert Humphrey once said, the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped. I believe children are some of our most vulnerable citizens. The Department of Human Services (DHS) has the responsibility to investigate charges of abuse or neglect.

In 2005, there were nearly 129,000 child protection complaints warranting over 72,000 investigations by Child Protection Services (CPS) workers resulting in 28,192 victims. Many of these cases were served well under difficult situations. However, it pains me to hear of any tragic situation where a child is abused.

In this state we have many wonderful loving families. I believe strongly that families are the foundation of our communities. Unfortunately, child abuse and neglect does occur sometimes both within families as well as childcare facilities. When the state must intervene, we all hope it is an effective effort to protect children. Sadly, some recent cases have led to further abuses of children.

I am speaking specifically of the Khristopher Cross case in Grand Rapids and the Ricky Holland case in Lansing which is still under investigation. These recent cases grieve us and disturb us, and they have strengthened my efforts to seek improvements in our child safety programs.

As chairman of Senate Families and Human Services Committee, I convened a hearing to review how the Department of Human Services approves and revokes day-care licenses and handled other procedures related to the Grand Rapids-area case in which Mr. Cross was allowed to have his day-care license renewed despite the fact that he was being investigated by law enforcement officials for serious crimes. At the hearing, I was surprised and disappointed to hear DHS officials testify that they did not notify the parents of the children in the Cross daycare that an investigation was being conducted that threatened the safety of those children.

At the conclusion of the hearing, the department was directed to respond in writing to specific questions and make recommendations for improvements. After reviewing the response and my own independent research, I am introducing three bills as a part of an ongoing effort to improve our child protection system.

First, I am introducing legislation that would require day-care facilities to notify parents if high risk investigations are being conducted by the department. A high risk investigation occurs when the allegation is made involving death or serious injury, alleged physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, endangerment, or exploitation, or any situation which threatens the life of a child in care.

Secondly, I am introducing legislation that will clarify that DHS workers and local police and prosecutors will share information so that trouble signs can be noted by a wider group, and intervention can be started more readily. Better communication is needed between care providers and the general public.

Additionally, I am introducing a bill to clean up a loophole in existing law which shields rogue CPS workers from accountability because their actions or misdeeds are reported only in confidential records which are not available in disciplinary hearings.

Finally, I continue to support additional staff for the investigation of child protection. Governor Granholm's proposal for 51 new CPS workers is a good start, and I'll work with members of the DHS subcommittee I also chair to identify funds for those workers. I will work with my legislative colleagues to add more staff in critical areas. The state budget can never be too tight not to prioritize the safety of children.

This is only the first step in a series of legislative changes that I hope will reduce the risks for children. I think citizens realize that no set of laws or policies can stop every case of abuse, but they expect us to confront shortcomings in our system. I will continue to work with my legislative colleagues, the DHS and the governor to do just that.

Mother vows to fight after losing parental rights

Saturday, May 13, 2006

By Theresa D. McClellan
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Marina Ivanova appeared stunned as she left a courtroom Friday after a judge terminated the parental rights of her and her ex-husband.

A woman who met Ivanova when they lived at a homeless shelter approached her and told her not to give up.

"God didn't bring you this far to leave you now. It's not over. You can't give up," Shelia Richards told the Ukraine native.

Ivanova, 32, looked toward Richards and gasped, then cried, each wail getting louder as she buried her head in the woman's shoulder.

Ivanova's two children were removed from her Southeast Side apartment by police in 2004. Authorities said the children, ages 3 and 23 months, were found in urine-soaked beds surrounded by overwhelming filth, including garbage and feces spread around the home.

On Friday, the judge said the children, now in foster care, would be made available for adoption.

As Ivanova stood crying in the hallway, Bishop Walter Durham, head of Families United for Justice and one of her many supporters, approached her. He told her they would appeal.

She and her ex-husband, James Warner, have 20 days to appeal the decision by Family Court Judge G. Patrick Hillary. Neither Warner nor his attorney could be reached for comment.

Before giving his opinion, Hillary spent more than an hour reviewing testimony from psychologists, therapists and child advocates, some of whom contradicted one another on the parents' suitability.

Hillary cited one therapist who said the children seemed afraid of Ivanova during visitation, and Warner referred to the youngest child as "it" or "the baby."

The judge said Ivanova never acknowledged responsibility for her role in the reason the children were wards of the court. She repeatedly said, "They don't take the children away

in the Ukraine" or "I am a Christian" when asked how she would care for the children, the judge said.

Ivanova went through parenting classes but declined to take mental-health drugs, stating she preferred herbal medicine. She was diagnosed as severely depressed and obsessive compulsive, according to court testimony.

"This is not a case of a mother in a strange land unable to navigate the system," Hillary said, adding he resented implications Ivanova was treated differently because of her immigrant status.

"A child is a child. I don't care if the child is Asian, Indian, American, every child has the right to be protected," he said.

"This is about protecting children who have suffered abuse and will continue to suffer abuse if returned to their mother and father."

Outside court, Ivanova held pictures of her children she said were taken during visitation last Thanksgiving. In them, the bright-eyed youngsters were smiling, sometimes cheek to cheek with their mother.

"These are not the pictures of frightened children," Ivanova said. "I will keep fighting. But now, today, I am in pain."

Grandfather faces life for sex abuse

Saturday, May 13, 2006

By John Agar
The Grand Rapids Press

ALLEGAN -- A convicted sex offender, Ronald Rupert slept in the same bed with his grandchildren, who say he forced them to perform sex acts.

The evidence, police say, is documented in some of the 20,000 images of child pornography seized from the home that two families -- including seven children -- once shared just outside the city.

The images, along with reports of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, led to numerous charges against Rupert, 56, his son, James Rupert, 26, and Isaac Kelly, 73, the great-grandfather of children in the other family.

On Friday, Ronald Rupert became the first convicted in a child-abuse case investigators describe as one of the worst in West Michigan. Rupert pleaded guilty to three charges of first-degree sexual assault. He faces up to life in prison when sentenced June 3 by Allegan County Circuit Judge Harry Beach.

In exchange for the guilty pleas, prosecutors will drop 16 other felonies: sexual assault, child-sexually abusive activity, using a computer to commit a crime.

Rupert, who left school after the eighth grade, told the judge he sexually abused his 9-year-old granddaughter, who did not live in the house but visited on weekends, earlier this year in Valley Township. As part of his plea, he had to describe sex acts he performed on the girl, but he said little else. A woman who quickly left the courtroom after his plea would not comment.

The other seven children, including four belonging to James Rupert and his wife, have been removed from the home. Prosecutors are trying to terminate the Ruperts' parental rights to their children, ages 8, 7, 4 and 3.

The parents of the other children, ages 9, 6, and 11 months, had their parental rights terminated last week. They have not been charged.

The husband earlier told The Press he and his wife had no idea their children had been victimized, or they would have stopped it. He also said he did not know Ronald Rupert was a sex offender.

But statements given to investigators contradicted the husband. All but James Rupert "have all made subsequent statements through the course of investigation that they were

aware that James Rupert was molesting the children for some time, however, they did not intercede to stop it," Assistant Prosecutor Myrene Koch said in a child-neglect petition.

Both mothers of the children "report that they allowed the children to sleep in the bed with Ronald Rupert," who was convicted of sexually assaulting a child in 1999, the petition said. "The parents were aware of the conviction, and advised in July 2005 by Protective Services that he should not be around the children unless supervised."

All of the children except the 11-month-old and 6-year-old are listed as potential sex-abuse victims. James Rupert is charged with first- and second-degree sexual assault, while Kelly, the great-grandfather in the other family, is charged with child sexually abusive activity and using a computer to commit a crime. Both face up to life in prison if convicted.

The children told authorities Ronald Rupert forced them to perform sex acts on him and each other while he took pictures over at least the past three years, records showed.

Defendant sits out trial

The Grand Rapids Press

Saturday, May 13, 2006

GRAND RAPIDS -- Curtis Laverne Baker, accused of breaking into an apartment and sexually assaulting a 6-year-old boy in 1992, does not want anything to do with his trial. Kent County Circuit Judge George Buth told Baker on Friday to sit in a holding area outside court, where he could hear proceedings and pass notes to his attorney. "I don't have any desire to participate," Baker said in a brief court appearance. Assistant Prosecutor Jay Stone has called the victim and his parents to testify, along with crime-scene investigators. He plans next week to show DNA ties Baker to the crime. Testimony showed an intruder pushed open a window to gain entry into the boy's bedroom, where he was raped.

Bad Axe man charged with sex abuse of child

FIRST EDITION
THE FLINT JOURNAL

Sunday, May 14, 2006

By Joe Lawlor
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A Bad Axe man arrested Friday by state police on sex abuse charges was hauled to Flint for a Saturday court appearance.

Clarence Ball, 35, faces charges on four counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct of a child under age 13.

Police said the alleged crime happened in Genesee County and Ball was arrested at his home Friday evening. He was arraigned Saturday morning in Genesee County Circuit Court.

No further details were available Saturday.

Man gets prison for Internet child porn

Saturday, May 13, 2006

By John S. Hausman

MUSKEGON CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

An admitted Internet child-sex predator, arrested at his Roosevelt Park home after an investigation by the state attorney general's office, has been sentenced to prison for up to 20 years.

Muskegon County Circuit Judge Timothy G. Hicks on Friday ordered 44-year-old David Michael Braley, 2957 Westland, to prison for five to 20 years for four counts of producing "child sexually abusive material" and three to 10 years for one count of using a computer in an attempt to solicit a child online for immoral purposes. The sentences are to be served at the same time.

Braley pleaded guilty as charged to all counts April 12.

The soliciting count stemmed from Braley's attempts to seduce a young girl via the Internet. The child-porn counts were based on four computer disks discovered at Braley's home after his arrest on the other charge. He was arrested as part of a statewide investigation of online child sex abuse by the attorney general's Child and Public Protection Unit.

"Mr. Braley, unfortunately you are a classic online predator," Hicks said before pronouncing sentence.

"We should be very, very grateful for the excellent police work that detected your activities before you could do to any young girl the things you said you wanted to do to her, and wanted her to do to you," Hicks said. "It's raunchy, terrible, sordid stuff."

On the other side of the ledger, Hicks said, he had received many letters from family and friends supporting Braley, noting his otherwise crime-free life and his 20 years of service in the U.S. Navy.

Braley said nothing in court.

Braley, arrested in February, was one of more than 80 people arrested by investigators from the Child and Protection Unit via the two-year-old state effort.

May 15, 2006

Man pleads guilty in sex abuse case

ALLEGAN - A 56-year-old man has pleaded guilty to three charges of sexual assault in a case where police say they recovered about 20,000 images of child pornography from a two-family home. The man faces up to life in prison when sentenced June 3 by Allegan County Circuit Judge Harry Beach.

In exchange for Friday's pleas, prosecutors will drop other felonies, including child sexually abusive activity. The man's 26-year-old son and a 73-year-old man from the other family also have been charged in the case. Seven children lived in the home near Allegan, and all but two were listed as potential sexual abuse victims, The Grand Rapids Press reported. Authorities began investigating in February when a school official contacted police with concerns.

From staff and wire reports

Published May 15, 2006

Highfields' founder fears youth camp's future at risk

Ex-judge says facility is needed to redeem kids

By Stacey Range
Lansing State Journal

At times, Robert Drake gets so choked up he can't finish telling stories about the troubled boys who find hope at Highfields.

At other times, the founder of the Onondaga-based camp for juvenile offenders just shakes his head in disbelief at reports of boys being mistreated by staff there.

Drake, who served as an Ingham County probate and juvenile court judge for periods between 1956 to 1985, was troubled by the impersonal institutions where he was sending boys. His idea: a camp where troubled teens would be given a chance to learn tools for success.

With the help of numerous community supporters, the residential center opened in 1962 as the nonprofit Camp Ingham. Drake served as president for several years, officially retiring as a member of the Highfields board in 1972, but remained active in some operations into the 1980s.

Drake, now 83, sat down with the Lansing State Journal this past week to talk about the recent problems at Highfields and what he thinks ought to be done.

- What was your reaction when you started reading about the allegations of mistreatment at Highfields?

- It was very upsetting, shocking. I was wondering how far this went. Our intent when we created this was not to bully kids.

For many of them, this is the first time in their lives they've had someone care about them.

It's very difficult. A lot of work went into this, and a lot of promises were made. It can't be shut down.

- Do you think the problems stem from a few bad apples, or do you think it goes deeper?
- I hope it's a case of a few bad apples. I know that there are some people out there who are really dedicated and devoted to helping these youngsters succeed.
- Do you think wrongs were committed against some of the Highfields' boys?
- Some of those incidents should've never happened.

Highfields has never been about bullying and physical punishment.

I don't believe in spare the rod, spoil the child or in tough love. I do believe that you need to set standards, rules and limitations for kids that are fair and just. They will learn respect by being shown respect. If they mess up again, they lose their chance.

But these are early-stage offenders. Why throw away the lives of kids that can be turned in a positive direction?

- What do you think needs to be done?
- If the incidents are symptoms of a disease or culture out there, then major surgery is needed to restore its purpose as an opportunity camp, not a boot camp.

If they're isolated incidents committed by one or two bullies and they've been fired, then there might be some overreaching going on in what is necessary to provide corrections.

But I'll have to trust the current board and state to make that determination. As a judge, I don't make a decision until I have all of the facts, and I'm not that involved any more.

- Do you think too much damage already has been done?
- One has to wonder if it can survive after all of this negative attention. I worry that people are losing confidence in the camp and will stop supporting it. That would be awful. Kids need this opportunity.

Contact Stacey Range at 377-1157 or srange@lsj.com.

Issues at Highfields

- Allegations involving Highfields staff physically mistreating youth led a group of Ingham County judges to pull 18 boys from the treatment center in February.
- When the state removed 15 more boys three days later, Highfields suspended operations of its residential program, laid off 71 workers and sent the remaining youths home.
- Highfields also has dismissed its president, fired two staffers and reprimanded several others.
- The state last week began the process of revoking Highfields' license.
- Highfields' board is working on a corrective action plan addressing safety, communication and training for staff.

Steering youths away from trouble Caring adults aim to reduce possibility young people's problems deepen

Saturday, May 13, 2006

BY CATHERINE O'DONNELL
News Staff Reporter

When Victor Amezcua was 13, he did some community service, part of the reparation for what he calls "a youthful indiscretion."

These days, he's mentoring a 15-year-old who's also been in trouble with the law. It's part of a countywide program to stem the number of youngsters, particularly black youngsters, under court supervision.

In mid-March, The Village Initiative matched 25 youngsters with 23 mentors committed for at least one year. Community organizer and social worker Lefiest Galimore founded and leads the program, which is funded by a two-year, \$271,000 grant from the Corporation for National & Community Services. The corporation is the grantmaking agency behind the nation's AmeriCorps project.

Galimore and five other area leaders are also working on summer recreation for low-income kids. There's no quality recreation for such youngsters, said Galimore, because they can't afford programs that cost money.

In early January 2005, a friend sought Galimore's help because her 14-year-old son was in Washtenaw County Juvenile Detention, suspected of participating in a fast-food restaurant robbery. Three weeks later, the boy was released without being charged, but by then, Galimore had learned that a disproportionate number of black youths are under court supervision in Washtenaw County. According to the Michigan Juvenile Department Association, 54 percent of young people ages 12-18 in the county's detention facility are black, but black residents compose only 12 percent of the county's population.

A caring adult can help reduce the possibility of future offenses, said Deborah Shaw, juvenile probation supervisor for the Washtenaw County Trial Court Juvenile Division. Mentoring, she said, could increase compliance with probation orders and keep young people from getting deeper in the court system.

Mentors in the Village Initiative include ministers, retirees, business people and a pediatrician, all of whom are at least 24 years of age and willing to meet six hours a month with their assigned youngsters. Area groups participating include the Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church, Bethel AME Church, Brown Chapel, the Ypsilanti

NAACP, New Hope Baptist Church, Amistad Community Church and the Ministers' Alliance of Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti & Vicinity.

Amezcuca got involved after reading about the number of youngsters in the criminal justice system.

"Black male youth are essentially being left behind. They don't get direction, and I see that as a problem for our society," said Amezcuca, who also sees too many young Latino immigrants at risk.

In February, mentors were trained in a four-phase curriculum developed by the National Partnership for Mentoring. It includes approaching the young person, helping to set goals, keeping the relationship going and ending it well. As part of the preparation, each mentor undergoes a background check.

Galimore, who is seeking at least two more mentors for the current year, plans to eventually have mentors for 50 young people.

Amezcuca, 42, a bartender who is working on a master's degree in organizational leadership, has met with his mentee an hour and a half each week. They've been bowling and have played miniature golf. The Hands-On Museum also was interesting, Amezcuca said, because the young man initially balked, thinking the museum is for young kids only. But he found it interesting - and that led to good conversation.

Some encounters don't go well, Amezcuca said. Sometimes, the young man sits with his arms folded, unwilling to talk.

The Village Initiative is a pilot program. If successful, it could be rolled out to other cities around the country, said Galimore, who holds master's degrees in education and social work from the University of Michigan.

Gov.'s health plan

'Universal access' scheme welcome step even if flawed

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, May 15, 2006

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's "universal access" health plan needs more substance to effectively combat criticism that's it's much about election-year politics. But give her credit, too, for advancing a concept that once seemed unattainable: health insurance coverage for all.

The proposal announced last week is an expansion of a good idea she put forth in January that didn't get the attention it deserved. That scheme consists of using new federal Medicaid money the state is seeking to subsidize health insurance for low-income families and individuals, with the goal being to cover 550,000 people - half the state's uninsured.

However, with Massachusetts recently garnering universal praise for a more ambitious program that would result in health insurance for every one of its residents, Granholm is upping the ante, albeit with a somewhat different strategy.

Therein lies a weakness. While Massachusetts also is eyeing Medicaid dollars to fund part of its plan, the state is mandating that all employers acquire insurance for their workers, buying it at cheap rates, with state subsidies where warranted.

Such a requirement makes the Massachusetts plan more realistic than Granholm's approach of voluntary participation, though she claims her package of tax incentives, subsidies and lower-cost benefit plans will be so attractive that the self-employed and businesses not offering coverage will want to sign on.

Even if she's right, there is a real question, not just raised by Republicans, that her health program is underfinanced, and that state money will be needed in a budget with nothing to spare. Similar doubts have been raised about the Massachusetts model spearheaded by that state's Republican Gov. Mitt Romney, a son of Michigan's former chief executive.

Odds are skeptics in both states are correct. In fact, Granholm's pitch to the feds for the extra \$600 million in Medicaid to finance part of her plan has yet to be approved.

But we're willing to risk that surprise for the potential the Granholm plan offers: universal health coverage, which would lead to a healthier state and lower medical costs, because people would attend to ailments early on rather than the uninsured showing up in emergency rooms when their conditions become severe.

While we'll allow that Granholm's health plan to cover 1.1 million uninsured is not completely baked, Michigan has an appetite for what's she's cooking, especially if it comes at a price the state can afford.

Granholt Pitches Healthcare Change

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Governor Jennifer Granholm is pitching a way to reduce the number of uninsured people in Michigan, but to start covering them the state needs federal approval and help.

Right now, more than 60-thousand households are eligible for employer-based health coverage, but don't take it.

Six years ago, 83% of those insured in Michigan had employer based coverage. That number has dropped since then and today, more than a million people in Michigan have no health coverage at all.

Massachusetts recently passed a law designed to guarantee health coverage for virtually all residents by next July.

Vermont also passed a similar plan last week.

Web Editor: Joshua Aldredge, Producer

Granholtm touts insurance plan

Saturday, May 13, 2006

By Chris Meehan
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After touring Borgess Medical Center on Friday, Gov. Jennifer Granholm took time to speak with a Kalamazoo woman about problems the woman says she is having with the new Medicare Part D prescription-drug program.

Although Granholm came to Kalamazoo to tout her proposed health care plan for the state's uninsured, she listened intently for several minutes as Betty Rounds described her plight.

Rounds, who takes 22 prescription medicines a day, told the governor that she is one of the people whose health is threatened by what looks to be a gaping hole in the recently created federal prescription plan.

"Medicare is not going to provide even a fraction of what I will need," said Rounds, whose difficulties with Medicare Part D were chronicled in a front-page Gazette column this week. Monday is the deadline for people to enroll in Medicare Part D or face being charged extra for the coverage at a later date.

"We qualify for nothing. It is just a mess," said Rounds, who signed up, along with her husband, Joseph, for Medicare Part D in late April.

Before speaking with Rounds, Granholm said that her new Michigan First Health Care Plan promises to assist people who have no health coverage at all, which means it wouldn't apply to people such as Rounds, who has Medicare. As for the new Medicare Part D, Granholm said it is too early to tell if problems -- such as Rounds described -- will be widespread.

Even so, Granholm said, it is important to pay attention to stories such the one Rounds has to tell.

Rounds is one of about 300 low-income people who have received free medications for the last several years from Kalamazoo's First Presbyterian Health Clinic.

Now that as many as 250 of these people have signed up for Medicare Part D, they are no longer eligible for free prescription drugs.

As best as she can tell, Rounds said to Granholm, her new Medicare plan will not come even close to covering all of the medicine that she needs.

Granholm said this was the first that she heard of this specific issue. But she told Rounds, ``let's see if we can be helpful to you, OK?"

In a short talk to a crowd of about 100 people in the spacious lobby of the Stryker Center at Borgess, Granholm praised the state-of-the-art hospital, saying ``every citizen should have the privilege of being cared for here."

Sketching her new health-care plan, she said it would provide basic, no-frills care -- tied together with the latest in electronic hospital records technology -- for the state's 1.1 million uninsured.

This will happen, she said, if the state can obtain some \$600 million in federal Medicaid funding to combine with \$400 million in state funding. The state money is already used to cover uninsured people.

``We are here to serve more than ourselves, but to serve one another" -- and that is what her universal health-care plan would provide, she said.

After speaking to Granholm, Rounds said, ``We need to create a safety net for those of us" who will be paying more for medicine under the new Medicare Part D.

Choose or lose Medicare drug plan

May 15, 2006

BY KATIE MERX
FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

It's crunch time.

If you want Medicare prescription drug benefits and haven't enrolled, you have until midnight.

If you're eligible and you want the benefit, you can enroll by phone, on the Internet, or by mail, but you must do it today.

For help, call Medicare at 800-633-4227 or visit www.medicare.gov. Or you can enroll or ask questions by calling the Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program at 800-803-7174.

Despite congressional pressure, Medicare officials say they will not extend the deadline for the voluntary prescription drug program. So if you have relatives who are eligible for Medicare, talk to them today to find out whether they've enrolled and help them make a decision if they haven't.

About 400,000 Michiganders who are eligible for the benefit and don't have another form of drug coverage had not enrolled as of May 7, according to the latest Medicare figures. This is the first year that the federal health program for seniors and disabled Americans has offered a prescription drug benefit.

Here's what will happen if you miss the midnight deadline:

- ☐ Those senior and disabled U.S. citizens who are eligible for the program now and don't have some other form of drug coverage will pay a monthly penalty if they wait and enroll in the future.

- ☐ After midnight, the next opportunity to enroll will be Nov. 15 through Dec. 31 for benefits beginning Jan. 1, 2007.

- ☐ When you do join, your premium cost will go up at least 1% per month for every month you waited. Like other insurance, you will have to pay this penalty as long as you have Medicare prescription drug coverage. Under current law, people who wait until December to enroll would have \$2.31 per month added to their premium. That amount would rise each year to reflect the national average premium.

Dozens of private insurance companies are administering the Medicare prescription-drug program. About 40 plans are available in Michigan. To enroll, Medicare beneficiaries must choose the one that suits their medical needs.

The plans vary according to costs per month, the medicines they'll pay for, the patient's contribution for prescriptions and which pharmacies patients can use.

Because of the many variables, seniors have reported being frustrated and confused. But Medicare officials say counselors still can help people decide today which plans are best for them and get them enrolled.

Mary Johnson, executive director of the Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program encouraged people to enroll, whether or not they use prescription medicines right now.

"It does help people," Johnson said. "You don't buy house insurance because you hope your house will burn down. This is the same thing."

Contact **KATIE MERX** at 313-222-8762 or kmerx@freepress.com.

MAKING THE CHANGE

- Before you talk to a drug plan counselor, you'll need:

- Your Medicare card
- A list of your medications, with frequency and dosages
- Your preferred pharmacy's name and location

To get help choosing and enrolling in a plan, call:

- The Medicare assistance hotline at 800-633-4227 or visit www.medicare.gov
- The Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program at 800-803-7174.

If you have questions for a specific plan, call it directly.

- Call Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan at 800-485-4415.
- Call Health Alliance Plan at 800-361-7946.
- Find phone numbers for other plans by calling Medicare.

Medicare Deadline Spurs a Debate Over Penalties

Bottom of Form

By ROBERT PEAR
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Published: May 15, 2006

WASHINGTON, May 14 — Enrollment in Medicare's new prescription drug benefit lurches to a conclusion on Monday, with beneficiaries, insurers and many lawmakers saying Congress should eliminate the financial penalty for people who sign up late.

Ms. Stolte, 82, and her daughter received help with the new prescription drug plan from Bobbie Langeland.

Under one idea that is gaining momentum, Monday would still be the deadline for enrollment and beneficiaries would not have another opportunity to sign up until November. But people who sign up at the end of this year would be spared the late enrollment penalty, a permanent surcharge that would otherwise increase all future premiums by 7 percent or more.

Prospects for waiving the penalty will become clearer in coming weeks, as a picture emerges of whether people who failed to enroll want to do so. If the drug benefit becomes a big issue in fall campaigns, more Republicans may embrace the idea as a way to deflect Democratic attacks without changing the structure of the new program.

With Monday's deadline looming, insurance counselors around the country said they were overwhelmed with pleas for help from Medicare beneficiaries trying to select plans.

As President Bush made a final push last week to encourage enrollment, Medicare officials reported that some low-income beneficiaries were being overcharged at pharmacies, while others were assigned in error to drug plans different from the ones they had chosen. The problems are reminiscent of those that occurred, on a much larger scale, in the first weeks of the program.

In a recent memorandum to insurers, the Bush administration said it had "received numerous complaints" that poor people eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid were "being charged incorrect co-payments at the pharmacy." In general, the co-payment for such beneficiaries is not supposed to exceed \$3 or \$5 for a prescription, and poor people living in nursing homes are not supposed to have any co-payments.

But the administration said some beneficiaries had been charged too much because insurers had not updated their computer systems to show the correct co-payment amounts.

On May 1, the Bush administration assigned hundreds of thousands of low-income people to Medicare drug plans chosen at random by the federal government. In some cases, these assignments prevailed over choices made by beneficiaries. The government's choice "trumped a beneficiary election" to enroll in a different plan, the administration said in a memorandum to insurers.

In some cases, it said, insurers submitted the beneficiary's request to the government, but the request was not approved because of computer "processing errors" at the federal Medicare agency.

Medicare officials also acknowledged problems and discrepancies in some of their enrollment records, listing membership in various drug plans. "Plans have reported that some members are disappearing" from these lists, the administration said in a memorandum to insurers.

In January, California, like many other states, set up an emergency program to help low-income people having difficulties filling prescriptions under the new Medicare law. Stan Rosenstein, the Medicaid director in California, said last week, "We are spending a half-million dollars a day on our program because a number of people are still having problems."

The California program is set to expire on Tuesday. The Legislature is working with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to extend it, with some changes, through Jan. 31.

Gov. John Baldacci of Maine said, "More than four months after the start of this benefit, many low-income Maine residents remain unable to obtain their drugs through

Medicare." The state is spending more than \$100,000 a week to help them, Mr. Baldacci said in a letter last week to Mr. Bush.

The Bush administration originally said that more than eight million low-income people were eligible for extra help with premiums, co-payments and other costs under the drug program. But fewer than one-fourth of those eligible are receiving it.

Beatrice M. Disman, a Social Security official, said her agency had approved slightly more than 1.7 million applications. Many people were disqualified because their assets exceeded federal limits (\$11,500 for an individual, not counting the value of a home and a car).

Jacqueline B. Kosecoff of UnitedHealth Group, the largest Medicare drug plan, said, "We support elimination of the asset test."

William D. Novelli, chief executive of AARP, the lobby for older Americans, said some people had been intimidated by the application form, which warns beneficiaries that they "may be sent to prison" if they do not disclose the value of life insurance policies and money set aside for funeral expenses.

Dr. Mark B. McClellan, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said, "We are not supporting legislation to change the asset test at this time. Our efforts are focused on getting help to people who need it most." The Medicare test is more generous than the criteria used in many other federal and state programs, he said.

The Monday deadline is for current beneficiaries, people who were eligible for Medicare on Jan. 1 or earlier. Those who become eligible for Medicare in the future have a seven-month period in which to sign up. The period covers the month of eligibility plus three months before and three months after.

The purpose of the late enrollment penalty is to encourage people to sign up as soon as possible, before they have significant drug costs. Some insurance companies dislike the penalty because they will have to collect it, and they say the cost of collection will often exceed the amount of the penalty.

Karen M. Ignagni, president of America's Health Insurance Plans, a trade group for the industry, said the idea of waiving the penalty for 2006 was "a good proposal."

Senator Jon Kyl, Republican of Arizona, said the penalty was "too severe." Several House Republicans, including Jeb Bradley of New Hampshire and Tom Price of Georgia, have introduced bills to waive it this year.

"We should not penalize those who still need time to make this very personal and important choice," said Mr. Price, an orthopedic surgeon.

The Bush administration has said it will not levy the penalty on poor people who qualify for low-income subsidies. But Peter L. Ashkenaz, a spokesman for the Medicare agency, said officials did not have authority to eliminate the late fee for others.

Dr. McClellan said the administration had not taken a position on legislative proposals to waive the penalty. "We will revisit the issue after May 15," he said.

Representative E. Clay Shaw Jr., Republican of Florida, said, "Democrats have scared seniors away from the program by bad-mouthing it."

Democrats have said that the drug benefit was inherently confusing, and that blunders by the Bush administration had compounded the confusion. The House Democratic whip, Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, said the late enrollment penalty would burden beneficiaries with "a 7 percent tax on their drugs for life."

At an enrollment seminar last week in Hagerstown, Md., six counselors sitting at computers in the public library helped beneficiaries sort through 47 drug plans. Many of the beneficiaries had been getting free drugs through a state program, Medbank of Maryland, and they expected to pay more under Medicare.

"The new program is not going to help at all," said Beverly J. Hines, 75. She and her husband have a combined income of \$20,040 a year, just \$240 above the limit for getting extra assistance. She faces the prospect of paying \$1,799 this year for drugs that previously cost her nothing.

Barbara F. Horne, 80, said she did not take any prescription medicines, but felt she had to sign up to avoid the late enrollment penalty.

"We are being penalized for being healthy," Ms. Horne said.

But other beneficiaries have been pleasantly surprised.

After attending a seminar on the drug benefit last October in Wichita, Kan., William Q. Beard, 74, a retired chemist, said, "I have a Ph.D., and it's too complicated to suit me." In December, he signed up for the most expensive Humana plan, which charges a monthly premium of \$54.20, and he is satisfied.

"It's worked out better than I anticipated," Mr. Beard said. "It's pretty cheap, compared with what I was paying."

Pauline H. Olney, 74, a retired nurse in Santa Rosa, Calif., north of San Francisco, said in November that the drug benefit was "hopelessly complicated." She and her husband signed up in April for the United Medicare MedAdvance plan, offered by UnitedHealth.

"I am more pleased than I expected to be," Mrs. Olney said.

Her husband pays \$23 for a month's supply of Lipitor, the cholesterol drug, for which he used to pay more than \$100, and \$23 a month for Aricept, an Alzheimer's drug that used to cost him \$150.

Monday, May 15, 2006

State nursing homes at risk?

Lack of sprinklers puts facilities near bottom in fire safety

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

Michigan's nursing homes are among the nation's least protected against fires, a fact that has advocates pushing for incentives to ensure the safety of the state's most vulnerable residents.

An estimated 64 percent of Michigan nursing homes did not have complete sprinkler systems last year. Nationally, only 17 percent of nursing homes lack full suppression systems, according to the American Health Care Association, which ranked Michigan the second-worst state.

Efforts to better equip homes for the ailing and aged have intensified in the five months since two people died in a fire at an Upper Peninsula facility built before state codes required sprinklers.

Federal and state efforts are under way to require sprinkler systems and to provide funding so older nursing homes can get assistance to pay for the upgrades.

"It's shameful that vulnerable residents who cannot evacuate themselves in case of fire continue to live in older buildings without sprinklers," said Alison Hirschel of the Michigan Campaign for Quality Care, a grass-roots organization advocating for quality care for the elderly.

"Many nursing homes have refused to install sprinkler systems without additional funding, and the state has failed to provide that funding or require that all facilities have sprinklers."

At the heart of the issue, nursing home operators say, is money.

At \$5 to \$7 per square foot, retrofitting old buildings can cost tens of thousands of dollars. The Michigan Department of Community Health is working to create financial incentives for older nursing homes. The facilities would have to make the initial investment and recoup some or all of their costs from Medicaid since facilities are reimbursed for 70 percent of Michigan's 42,000 nursing home residents.

Reginald Carter of the Michigan Health Care Association is skeptical that the state will set up incentives since Michigan has historically underfunded Medicaid reimbursements for nursing homes to upgrade facilities.

"What they say and what they do are two different things," said Carter, president and CEO of the organization that represents most Michigan nursing homes. "Michigan ought to be ashamed we are at this stage of sprinkling."

Sixteen states require that all nursing homes have full sprinkler systems, as opposed to partial systems which, for example, only cover kitchen areas.

A 2004 Government Accountability Office report also showed that 95 percent of Michigan nursing homes had fire safety deficiencies, putting the state in the bottom five in the nation in that measure.

Inducements possible

State Medicaid officials are working on a proposal that would give nursing homes financial incentives to install the costly sprinklers. The incentives would involve adjustments to the 40 variables used to calculate Medicaid reimbursements, and the plan could be ready for review in 60 to 90 days, said Jan Christensen of the Michigan Department of Community Health.

Sprinkler systems have been used for a century to protect property but recently became seen as a technology that can save lives. Michigan municipalities adopted one of three building codes during the mid-1990s that required all new nursing homes to have a sprinkler system, according to Larry Lehman, of the state Bureau of Construction Codes and Fire Safety.

But the majority of the state's nursing homes were built long before the codes were updated, so many of them were not built with sprinklers. The average Michigan nursing home is 35 years old, but some of them are 40, 50 or even 60 years old.

The Mather Nursing Center near Marquette was built during the 1970s and only had a partial sprinkler system -- securing only hazardous areas such as the boiler room and kitchen -- according to administrator Dana Smith.

But that sprinkler system didn't help when a fire broke out in a resident's room in December, sending 70 residents to the hospital and claiming the lives of 87-year-old Margaret Sarasien and 79-year-old Harry H. Mattice.

At the time, the nursing home had been cited for 13 violations by fire investigators and several more by the Michigan Department of Community Health.

Helen Fedar lived across the hall from where the fire started and couldn't get out of bed without assistance. She shared a room with Sarasien, who was more incapacitated than Fedar and needed help getting around. So the two women sat in the room with smoke billowing around them and waited to get out of the nursing home.

"There was nothing I could do but stay in bed; I just had knee surgery," said Fedar, 71. "I just had to wait until I was taken out. I was unconscious when they took me out."

Mather officials are working to install a sprinkler system, but beforehand, the facility was not alone in its state of fire safety.

Retrofit-funding bill stalls

Since cost is a barrier to installing sprinkler systems, the Nursing Home Fire Safety Act was introduced in December to set up a \$325 million fund to provide loans and grants to retrofit nursing homes. But the legislation has gone nowhere.

State Rep. Barb Vander Veen recently introduced a bill that would require all Michigan nursing homes to retrofit for sprinklers if the funding becomes available. It has been referred to a committee.

Most nursing homes would install sprinkler systems if there were incentives, said Vera Aljajawi, administrator at Abbey-A Mercy Living Center in Warren. Completely retrofitting the 200-bed facility likely would cost \$100,000, Aljajawi said, basing her estimate on the cost of a \$22,000 recent addition to another Warren nursing home.

"There needs to be an incentive financially from the state to do that," Aljajawi said. "These facilities that are older do need to be brought up to code."

Elizabeth Yelland's father, Wayne, survived the Upper Peninsula fire but he shared a room with the man who died. She is glad to see the state focusing attention on nursing home fire safety.

Though her father has died since the fire, it never occurred to him or Yelland to check whether the nursing home had a sprinkler system.

"I'd never put anyone I know into a nursing home without them now," Yelland said.

You can reach Kim Kozlowski at (313) 222-2024 or kkozlowski@detnews.com.

What to ask

Here are some questions to ask about fire preparedness before putting a loved one in a nursing home:

Operating features

Are drills conducted?

How frequently?

Are employees instructed in fire extinguisher use?

Is there a written evacuation plan?

Is it practiced regularly?

Detection and alarm

Is there a manual alarm system?

Is there a fire detection system?

Are there smoke detectors?

Are there detectors?

Are there audible alarms?

Are there visible alarms?

Is the building equipped with emergency lighting?

Is it tested monthly?

Is there an automatic fire department notification?

Putting out fires

Is there an extinguishing system?

Are there sprinklers throughout the building?

Where are they located?

Is there a water flow alarm?

Are valves supervised?

Are they electrical? Locked? Sealed?

Are fire extinguishers up to code?

Source: National Fire Protection Association

No sprinkler systems

Michigan has the nation's second highest percentage of nursing homes without sprinkler systems.

State	Total nursing homes	Number	Percentage without systems
South Dakota	111	78	70%
Michigan	429	314	63.9%
Colorado	214	124	58%
Arkansas	230	120	52%
New York	659	300	46%

Source: American Health Care Association, 2005

The Detroit News

Michigan Report

May 12, 2006

CHANGE UP IN FOOD STAMP DISTRIBUTION TO BE DISCUSSED

Instead of sending out food stamps to almost 500,000 Michigan residents at just the beginning of the month, an advisory group to Governor Jennifer Granholm is looking into the possibility of spreading those payments out to everyone throughout the month in an effort to help out grocery stores throughout the state.

However, the Associated Food and Petroleum Dealers of Michigan is also pushing for the state to actually divide payments up for the month, much like someone who gets a paycheck every two weeks, saying that will help stores with stocking food and having the right amount of employees on a shift.

For some time, grocers have argued that the food stamps, handed out through the 9th of each month, slam stores during that time, leaving them with uneven staffing and food stock levels.

Linda Gobler, president of the Michigan Grocers Association, said the state has argued that when food stamps were in paper form it would have been too labor intensive to spread payments out to people twice a month and when the electronic form of food stamps was adapted, there was a concern the federal government would not allow the program to be formatted in that way.

Jane Shallal, president of the AFPDM, said while Michigan would be the only state to do a twice-a-month payment, it helps the industry to plan in areas where a large portion of the food stamps are used.

But Jane Marshall, executive director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan, said there are issues to be considered, such as whether someone who does not have a car can afford to travel twice a month to the grocery store or whether a person who buys food in bulk to save money can do so on a twice-a-month system.

The Department of Human Services also would have to deal with staffing issues to integrate a new system, as well as pay for the technology upgrades, but Ms. Marshall said that the food stamp program can't exist without the grocers and that there is an economic development component to the discussion.

Karen Stock, spokesperson for DHS, said, "At this point, we're in a listening mode" when it comes to the industry proposal.

"Our main concern is that this would be a benefit, not a hardship," Ms. Stock said.

The department is estimating that there will be a higher cost with a twice-a-month system, but did not have exact numbers available.

Ms. Stock also said that about 52,000 recipients of food stamps get \$50 or less each month, so splitting the benefit up into \$25 payments “would make a pretty small check.”

The Michigan Food Policy Council is scheduled to meet Monday to discuss the food bank issue.

Postal workers collect food

The Kalamazoo Gazette

Monday, May 15, 2006

Despite rainy weather, Kalamazoo-area mail carriers picked up tons of donated food Saturday.

The cans of fruit, vegetables, juice and meat had not been weighed as of Monday, but it looks as if they brought in as much as last year, when 91,000 pounds of food was donated, said Mark Harrington, president of Kalamazoo Branch 246 of the National Association of Letter Carriers.

They picked up the food as part of the Help Stamp Out Hunger annual food drive.

"It went real well. It looks like a lot of food. The community reached out and gave," Harrington said.

Food donated in the Kalamazoo area will go to the Loaves & Fishes food bank. Food picked up in other outlying communities goes to the Salvation Army or to stock food banks in their areas, Harrington said.

Food giveaway planned

HOMETOWN HEADLINES

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, May 15, 2006

By George Jaksa

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FLINT - Food will be distributed from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. or until supplies last Thursday at Court Street United Methodist Church, 225 W. Court St.

The program is sponsored by Crossover, Downtown Outreach Ministry and Court Street United Methodist Church.

Published May 15, 2006

Women find renewal: Center offers aid in locating work, escaping abuse

By Ashley K. Symons
For the Lansing State Journal

When Beth Doan moved to the Lansing area in March, she felt scared and uncertain.

Doan, 44, had left her friends and family in Indiana to escape what she said was years of abuse from her husband.

She was having a hard time getting job interviews, despite 15 years of experience as a licensed practical nurse and was about to give up.

Then a friend told her about the Women's Center of Greater Lansing.

Co-Director Cindie Alwood helped Doan write a resume and choose an outfit for interviews, and even found her a place to live in Okemos.

"I cannot conceive what I would have done if the Women's Center wasn't here," Doan said.

"I really would have had to go back (home) because I was feeling that hopeless."

Doan is one of more than 200 women the center has helped since it opened on Lansing's east side almost a year ago.

The center offers a wide range of services, including one-on-one personal and career counseling, support groups, workshops, computer tutorials and legal counseling, all in one place and on a sliding scale.

"When you come in, we take you where you are," said Alwood, who lives in Meridian Township.

"Not where we think you should be, not where other people think you should be, but where you are."

Alwood founded the nonprofit center with longtime friend and Lansing resident Manuela Kress. Both have advanced degrees in rehabilitation counseling.

"Everyone assumed there was a women's center in Lansing," Kress said. "It's something that we always wanted to do and have always seen a need for."

'This is our dream'

They have mostly funded the center themselves, with help from donations, small grants and fundraisers.

They bought two adjacent buildings on Michigan Avenue, opening the center in the 1710 location in June and using the first floor of the 1712 site mostly for storage and workshop space. Kress, who works a separate full-time job and comes to the center in the evenings and on weekends, sold her house and moved into the second floor of the 1712 building.

Alwood gave up a full-time job to be at the center during the day. Both have been donating their time, although Alwood will start to draw a small income this month.

"This is our dream," Alwood said. "We have invested everything that we have - our time, energy, and souls - into this business and these buildings."

Boosting motivation

Alwood usually runs the center's professional clothes closet, which contains donated business suits, skirts, shoes, panty hose, makeup, and anything else needed for an interview.

The clothes are available at no cost to women involved in the Job Seekers group or involved in individual career counseling.

Women who come in for help finding a job are often given "homework" assignments to keep them motivated and on the right track.

"We don't send anyone out moping," Alwood said. "We send them out with a plan."

Alwood and Kress appreciate the support from the community, with both men and women donating time and furniture.

"We've had great support in terms of stuff, but we're struggling with getting money and we really need money, just for the day-to-day operations to provide the services that we do," Kress said.

The women also hope to expand to the 1712 building since they are outgrowing the current space. It will eventually hold a computer lab, a kitchen for healthy cooking classes, a bathroom, and the professional clothes closet.

There's a lot of work yet to be done, but Alwood said she will continue to believe "that what we're doing is right, and that we're on the right path, and that it will all work out."

Kettering University to hold benefit for safe house

HOMETOWN HEADLINES

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Saturday, May 13, 2006

By Christofer Machniak

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FLINT - Kettering University President Stan Liberty, who plays the jazz piano, highlights a program the school will hold Monday to benefit Harvest House, an area safe house for abused women and children.

The event, which kicks off Diversity Week on campus, is from 7-9 p.m. in the International Room of the Campus Center. The benefit will feature acts that include improv comedy, cultural dances and music.

Admission is \$2, with all proceeds going to the safe house. A raffle also will be held.

For more information, to make a donation, or volunteer support, e-mail Yusuf Hasan at hasa6632@kettering.edu.

LIFESTYLES

MOM TO MANY: Cynthia Lucas of Southfield opened her heart to dozens of neglected kids

May 14, 2006

BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING
DETROIT FREE PRESS

Wednesday was one of Cynthia Lucas' busy cooking days. Two of her six daughters wanted collard greens, but her husband, Alphonse Lucas, and another daughter had a taste for spaghetti. Solution: cook both.

Sometime before 4 p.m., just as she was finishing dinner preparations, the phone rang. A social worker was on the other end.

A 12-year-old girl needed a home. Right now.

Lucas stopped what she was doing, gathered five of her daughters into the family SUV and headed to Lutheran Social Services in Southfield to meet and greet the girl.

"That's part of what foster parenting is about," she said later. "You can't always get a day's or two days' notice. You have to be flexible."

Cynthia Lucas, 50, of Southfield is among thousands of women being honored today, Mother's Day. It's a day set aside to pay tribute to the vital role women play as nurturers and caregivers of children.

There are an estimated 80.5 million mothers in America, according to U.S. census figures.

Lucas magnifies the title of mother. In addition to giving birth to two children, she and her husband have adopted five children and been foster parents to 33 -- oops, as of Wednesday, make that 34. Alphonse Lucas, 54, also has two adult children from his first marriage.

At 19, Lucas' first full-time job required typing up the case histories of children in foster care. Their cases and faces tugged at her heart, and she pledged that one day she would become a foster mom and adopt children.

Years later, that's exactly what she did.

The Lucases became licensed foster parents in 1991. Convincing her husband to become a foster parent wasn't difficult.

"I'd see these commercials on TV with kids from different places, and they'd ask you to send money to support a child, and I'd always think about it," he said. "But I couldn't bring myself to just send money not knowing if it ever got to the child. This way I know where my money is going."

Their first foster child was a boy, a playmate for their son, Walter, Cynthia Lucas' first child. A steady stream of other children followed, including John Braxton, who they adopted when he was a teenager. He's now a 25-year-old construction worker living in California.

Seven girls live with them now: four adopted daughters -- Ranoda, 15, Asia, 13, Africa, 12, and Faith, 7; one biological daughter, Al'ana, 13, a 16-year-old foster daughter who

has lived with them for more than a year and the 12-year-old who arrived Wednesday. The foster children cannot be identified without permission from their parents. Ranoda and Faith are biological sisters as are Asia and Africa.

Their son, Walter Jackson, 29, of Redford Township and his wife, Lakesha, 28, have two children, adding grandma to Lucas' mothering roles.

Lucas has also inspired friends and family members to adopt or become foster parents. Camille Martin, a licensing specialist with Lutheran Social Services, who oversees the Lucas cases, said Lucas is a blessing because most foster parents refuse to accept teenagers in their home.

"It's hard to find placement for teenagers," Martin said. "Imagine a house full of teenage girls and all of their issues. She always seems to be able to manage them. She does what she can for each individual."

A typical day at home

The weekday gets going early in the Lucases' Southfield home -- a modern four-bedroom, 2.5-bath brick home in a new subdivision.

The girls' alarms start going off at 5:30, signaling the two oldest to get up. Cynthia Lucas lies in bed and listens for the sounds of their preparations. She's been awake since 4 a.m., when her husband gets up. He leaves for work about 4:45 a.m.

She could wake the children herself, but she believes an alarm clock helps teach them responsibility and punctuality.

The children get up and ready in shifts. The high schoolers, who need to be on the bus to Southfield-Lathrup at 6:45 a.m., are first. Another alarm sounds at 6 a.m. for the middle schoolers, whose bus picks them up for Birney Middle School at 7:15 a.m. Lucas wakes the youngest, Faith, 7, about 7 a.m. to be ready for her 8 a.m. bus to Stevenson Elementary School.

Occasionally, Lucas prepares a hot breakfast, but experience has taught her it's a waste of time and food.

"I spend more grocery money on breakfast than anything else," she said. "I want them to eat every morning, and I'm not always sure what they will eat on any given morning, so I try to have enough of every kind of breakfast food so they eat something. I hate scrambling eggs and frying bacon only to be told, 'I'm not that hungry.' "

She walks Faith to the bus stop and afterward takes a 30- to 45-minute walk through her subdivision, sometimes venturing to a nearby Dunkin' Donuts for a small hazelnut coffee with cream, no sugar. But she keeps her cell phone with her in case one of the children calls.

And that's exactly what happened during a recent morning's walk.

Ranoda called. She needed the order form and \$52 for a dance costume. Lucas drove to school to see that the order was in by the day's deadline.

Lucas spends most days preparing dinner -- she likes to have home-cooked meals on weekdays -- cleaning, gardening, visiting her own mom in Detroit or running errands.

The children begin arriving home in shifts about 2:45 p.m., and everyone, including her husband, is usually home for dinner by 4.

As each child arrives home she asks about their day and whether they have homework.

"How'd it go with those spelling words?" she asks Faith, recalling that they'd reviewed 10 words the night before.

"Good," Faith says, smiling brightly as she flops onto a couch in the family room.

After dinner, the children do schoolwork whether they have homework or not.

When they don't have homework, Lucas gives them an assignment -- a book or article to read or a review of the day's class work.

"Everybody here reads out loud sometimes," she said. "Too many kids get through school and can't read, and nobody catches it."

'They're all mine'

Parenting is her passion.

When she talks about her children, there are a couple of things Lucas likes to get straight right away.

First: She and her husband avoid terms like step, biological, foster and adopted. To them, their children are their children. Period.

"One of the things that annoys me most is when someone points to the children and says, 'Now, that one, that one's yours, right?' " she said, speaking with a Southern twang inherited from her parents, natives of Dothan, Ala. "That's a sore spot with us. I say, 'They're all mine.' "

Second: She and her husband don't take in children for the money. They do receive a state subsidy -- about \$500 a month per child -- but spend far more of their own money in activities, clothing, shoes, nights out and other expenses.

"We just spent \$70 and \$80 for gym shoes," she said. Asia and Africa recently tried out for the school's track team. "Our tab at the beauty shop is \$300, and that does not include my hair and Faith's. And we try to do something with them every weekend. Asia and Africa are about to start piano lessons. Al'ana and Ranoda were taking clarinet and violin lessons until recently. The money that the state gives, it helps you, but if you're committed to seeing that these children live normal, full lives, you are not going to make money."

She estimates their monthly expenses -- excluding their mortgage and utilities -- at about \$2,200 a month.

A stickler for the rules

Managing a house full of children requires rules and routines, Lucas said.

"We first try to get them to feel comfortable," she said. "Usually, we take them to dinner or someplace fun like Chuck E. Cheese, Jeepers, or another place where they can play and interact with the other children in the home.

"I believe in a parent being a parent, as does my husband, although he's not here as much," she said, explaining that in addition to his full-time job at DaimlerChrysler's Warren Truck Plant, Alphonse Lucas owns and runs a lawn care business, Al's Lawn Service, and is an assistant pastor of the church they attend, Goodwill Missionary Baptist Church on Detroit's west side.

They connect discipline to the child's infraction. "Mainly we withhold privileges," she said. "We might take the cell phone away for a few days. They can't go to a party they want to go to, or to the movies with friends. TV and radio privileges may get taken away."

Ranoda recalled an incident about a year ago when the older girls decided to attend a late movie.

They were enjoying the show when in walked Lucas with security.

"She came to the movie theater with her pajamas on," Ranoda said.

They never saw the movie's end. Afterward, their cell phones were taken and they were confined to the house for several days. "We had to study or listen to her lecture us," Ranoda said.

But Ranoda said she understands why her mother did it and knows she cares.

"She's always giving us little lectures on life," Ranoda said. "She tells us how black kids need to be stronger, how we need to be leaders instead of followers. Sometimes I do think she's too strict, but she tells us we'll appreciate it later in life."

Passing it on

Lucas learned mothering from her own mother.

"My mother didn't take children in, but there were always other children around," she said of Annie Burks, who turned 76 this month. "When I look back on my years growing up, it seems we were always doing something, going here and there. Yet my mother likes to remind me that we were poor."

Lucas' sister, Brenda Buckner, 51, of Detroit said Lucas, the second oldest, was always the mother among the siblings.

"I'm the oldest, but Sister was always the caregiver. There were three girls and two boys, and when the boys would go to acting up, she'd be the one who'd immediately get on their case, which was something because Sister is short. But she didn't care that they were bigger and taller, she'd tell them what to do."

Buckner has adopted four boys because of her sister. "She was always talking about it. She got everybody she could in the family to do it, and then she started getting people outside the family."

Lucas said even though she's had success with many children, a few relationships failed, mainly because the children could not or would not abide by the family rules.

"I'm honest when I talk with people about becoming a foster parent. It's not easy. You'll shed some tears. I've had children to lie on me, to steal from me. You can't let it stop you."

She regrets that she had to turn one teenager back after the child repeatedly stayed out late at night.

"I hate saying no," she said. "But part of my job is to protect these children. I can't protect them if they're not here. And I had other teenagers here watching what was going on." Still, she speaks with conviction about the importance of opening doors to give children a home.

"So many of our children out there are in need of a home. And I'm not stuck on black. I've had white kids living here. But I do feel we, African Americans, should do a better job of taking care of our own. We know how important the extended family has been throughout our history."

Al'ana would be living the life of an only child without her sisters.

She likes their company.

"You can always get one of them to play with you or talk about what's happening," she said. "I would get lonely if it was just me."

Lucas also says that when her children see her taking in other children, it teaches them firsthand the importance of sharing and giving.

"The children learn to play and socialize with all kinds of children. They learn that the world does not revolve around them," she said.

"I've always believed that if I bless other children, mine will be blessed."

Contact CASSANDRA SPRATLING at 313-223-4580 or spratling@freepress.com.

MEET THE LUCAS FAMILY

- **Alphonse Lucas:** 54, autoworker, lawn care business owner and minister at Goodwill Missionary Baptist Church.

Cynthia Lucas: 50, full-time mom, former medical researcher, certified elementary school teacher.

Foster daughter: 16, 10th-grader at Southfield-Lathrup. Joined family in January 2005. (Names of foster children cannot be given without permission from parents).

Ranoda: 15, ninth-grader at Southfield-Lathrup. She joined the family nine years ago.

Al'ana: 13, eighth-grader at Birney Middle School. She's a biological child of Cynthia and Alphonse.

Asia: 13, seventh-grader at Birney. She and her biological sister Africa moved in last summer. **Africa:** 12, sixth-grader at Birney.

Foster daughter: 12, joined the family Wednesday.

Faith: 7, first-grader at Stevenson Elementary. She is Ranoda's biological sister, and joined the family at age 3 months.

Walter Jackson: 29, Cynthia's son from a previous marriage, raised by her and Alphonse. Alphonse also has two sons from his first marriage who didn't live with this family.

John Braxton: 25, adopted son now living in California.

RULES OF THE LUCAS HOUSE

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- No weapons, drugs, drinking, smoking or swearing.

- Treat everyone with respect.

- Be active in church.

- Keep the house and yard neat.

- No cell phones after bedtime.

- No staying out later than curfew.

- Do school work whether you have homework or not.

- No TV or radio until all homework is completed.

Q&A ON FOSTER KIDS

- **QUESTION: How many children are in foster care in Michigan?**

ANSWER: 18,564, from infants to age 21. There are about 7,400 licensed homes.

Q: How many are available for adoption?

A: 6,196.

Q: What does the state pay foster parents?

A: Rates are \$14.24 a day for newborns to age 12 and \$17.59 for children 13 to 18. For those 19 to 21, the rate is \$17.59 or \$18.27, depending on a host of factors, including whether the child is still in school or transitioning to independent living.

Q: How can I become a foster parent?

A: Here's how:

- Attend orientation.
- Apply for licensing.
- Pass background checks and provide medical statements for all adults in the home.
- Have your house pass inspection by the Michigan Department of Human Services.
- Provide three acceptable references.
- Pass visits to the home by the licensing worker.
- Attend training.

Q: What are the qualifications?

A: You must be 18 or older, have good moral character and adequate space and be able to support yourself.

Q: Is there a Web site for more information?

A: Yes. Go to www.michigan.gov/dhs or the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange at www.mare.org.cq.

Source: Michigan Department of Human Services

CELEBRATING MOMS

- **80.5 million** mothers are in the United States.

55% of U.S. women are moms.

2 is the average number of kids that today's women are likely to have.

7 out of 10 moms held paying jobs, in or out of the home, in 2005, the most recent figures available.

150 million Mother's Day cards will be given this year.

25.2 years is the average age of women when they give birth the first time, a record high in U.S. record-keeping.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics

ADVICE FROM MOTHER LUCAS

- **"Homework is not** just the work the teacher sends home. It's work ... you do to prepare for the next day."

"A man can fall down, brush himself off and put on a suit and they'll still call him Mr. But a woman who falls down, no matter how well she dresses, people will still call her something else."

Detroit Free Press

May 15, 2006

DETROIT: Judge honors 41 people for auditing foster care

Forty-one members of the Wayne County Foster Care Review Board were honored last week by Third Circuit Court Chief Judge Mary Beth Kelly for their help in auditing 482 cases of abused and neglected children in foster care.

The board members spent several weeks checking court files to ensure that court orders and other documents comply with federal regulations. The state is under pressure from federal auditors who found mistakes during a previous audit. If the mistakes aren't corrected, they could cost the state more than \$200 million in federal funds for children in foster care.

Compiled by Jack Kresnak, Zlati Meyer and Free Press staff.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
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MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



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News Release

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Child support payments in Northern Michigan going electronic

May 15, 2006

Lansing – The Department of Human Services' Office of Child Support, in coordination with the Friends of the Court in 31 northern counties and Ottawa County in western Michigan, will begin disbursing some child support payments through a debit card beginning May 25. A new law requires all child support payments to be electronically disbursed via direct deposit into a personal checking/savings account or to a debit card, unless recipients meet hardship exception criteria.

Customers who currently receive paper checks in these counties have received information in the mail and were given the choice of direct deposit to their checking/savings account or to debit card. Paper child support checks will no longer be sent out to customers unless they meet the hardships exceptions described in the law.

Before implementation of the law about 30 percent of child support recipients in the state had their payments directly deposited into their personal checking or savings account. Customers currently participating in direct deposit are not required to switch to the debit card.

The new VISA debit cards, which will be issued at no cost to the customer, can be used like any other bank or credit union debit card at millions of locations that accept VISA debit cards - without incurring any fees. Customers can also get cash back with purchases from any of over 29,000 Interlink merchants in Michigan – again without fees. Customers choosing to access debit card funds using an automated teller machine (ATM) will be subject to ATM fees.

In states with electronic disbursement already in place, about two-thirds choose direct deposit to checking/savings and one-third choose direct deposit to debit cards.

Attached to this press release is an overview of electronic disbursement and a statewide implementation schedule which lists the 32 counties that will transfer to electronic disbursement during May.

For more information on electronic disbursement of child support go to the child support section of the DHS Web site, www.michigan.gov/dhs or to www.misdu.com.

This Week APHSA in Washington

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Senate Finance Committee Holds Hearing on Child Welfare

On May 10, the Senate Finance Committee held a hearing on "Fostering Permanence: Progress Achieved and Challenges Ahead for America's Child Welfare System." Sens. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), Max Baucus (D-Mont.), and Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) presided over the hearing. Grassley, who chairs the committee, said the hearing's purpose was for congressional members to hear testimony on child welfare issues generally and on the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and the Mentoring of Children of Prisoners programs specifically. He said he also wanted to elaborate on the issues raised during the hearing on the effects of meth on states' child welfare agencies. The authorization for both programs expires in FY 2006. Witnesses included Joan Ohl, commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Initiative; Arlene Templer, social services manager for the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribe; Joe Kroll, executive director of the North American Council on Adoptable Children; and Jackie Hammers-Crowell, a former foster youth. Member statements and panelists' testimonies will be available at <http://finance.senate.gov/sitepages/hearing051006.htm>. The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) also submitted a statement for the record supporting the reauthorization of the current \$505 million in mandatory (not discretionary) funding; encouraging additional mandatory funds to help states expand and continue the array of services and innovation; and discouraging any efforts to designate any additional funds for a specific purpose. APHSA's statement will be available at <http://www.napcwa.org>.

House Panel Marks Up Older Americans Act Reauthorization

On May 10, the House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Select Education marked up the Senior Independence Act, H.R. 5293, which would reauthorize programs under the Older Americans Act. The legislation is sponsored by Rep. Patrick Tiberi (R-Ohio). The bill adds older Americans residing in rural areas and those with limited English proficiency to the priority list of those who should be paid particular attention in consultation, state plans, and for services. It also would alter the Older American Community Service Employment Program by increasing the focus on unsubsidized

employment and decreasing the focus on community service. Participation time limits would be added to the program and the percentage of participants in a program that are engaged in unsubsidized employment would be increased from the present 20 percent level up to 30 percent. The legislation also requires that cost-sharing be encouraged for individuals at or above 125 percent of poverty in any of the OAA programs. In addition to delivering meals, the program can include nutrition counseling. The bill also lowers the age of relative caregivers in the Caregiver Support Program from 60 to 55 and adds financial literacy as one of the specific issues that should be addressed by caregivers in education and outreach under the Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation Prevention title of the Act. The legislation is expected to be marked up by the full committee on May 17. Although the Older Americans Act has not been reauthorized since fiscal year 2005, there is a strong effort in both the House and Senate to reauthorize it this year.

Budget Deal Continues to Elude House Leadership

On May 11, House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) appeared on the House floor to announce that there would be no vote on an FY 2007 budget resolution this week. There had been speculation earlier in the week that a vote on a resolution might take place late on May 11. Republican members of the House have been negotiating to resolve differences between those who want to cut spending and moderates who want assurances that funding for education, healthcare, and similar programs will not be cut.

House Appropriations Committee Approves FY 2007 Allocations and Agriculture Measure

On May 9, the House Appropriations Committee approved the FY 2007 302(b) subcommittee allocations that Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.) had first announced last week. The allocations include \$141.93 billion for Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education and \$17.812 billion for Agriculture. The full list is available at http://appropriations.house.gov/_files/302bscof.pdf. The committee also approved the FY 2007 agriculture appropriations bill with the same amounts for nutrition programs as approved by the panel's Agriculture Subcommittee last week (see This Week, May 5), including \$37.9 billion for the Food Stamp Program (FSP). The measure is scheduled for floor consideration next week.

Congressional Roundtable Discusses Child Welfare

On May 11, a Congressional Roundtable was held to discuss the strengthening courts provisions in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. Several members of Congress participated in the roundtable, including Representatives Wally Herger (R-Calif.), Tom DeLay (R-Texas), Dave Camp (R-Mich.), Melissa Hart (R-Pa.), Pete Stark (D-Calif.), and Adam Schiff (D-Calif.). Senators participating included Larry Craig (R-Idaho) and Mary Landrieu (D-La.). Invited experts included several child welfare administrators, judges, and former foster youth. The facilitated discussion focused on increasing collaboration between the courts and child welfare agencies, improved court data collection, permanency, and funding.

Administration Holds to Part D Enrollment Deadline; CMS Waives Late Enrollment Penalty

This week, the Bush administration indicated it is holding firm on the May 15 deadline for seniors to enroll in the Medicare Part D prescription drug plan. Michael Leavitt, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said 38 million Medicare beneficiaries already have enrolled in the program, but also noted that there have been challenges in reaching low-income individuals who could qualify for financial subsidies. Leavitt and many other federal officials toured the country this week, making stops at more than 1,000 events to encourage the remaining Medicare beneficiaries to enroll in a Part D plan before May 15. Anticipating a last-minute enrollment rush, CMS has added 6,000 telephone operators and quadrupled its computer enrollment capacity. Some members of Congress continue to support legislation to extend the May 15 deadline despite the unlikelihood that any congressional action will be taken.

Meanwhile, on May 9, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) announced that low-income beneficiaries who miss the May 15 deadline will be exempt from the late enrollment penalty. According to CMS, half the estimated 5.7 million seniors who have not yet signed up would qualify for the low-income subsidy. In April, CMS had created a special enrollment period to allow low-income beneficiaries to enroll after the May 15 deadline but maintained that the penalty would still apply. CMS determined that because low-income seniors pay only 20 percent of their Part D premiums, the penalties they would owe would be so low that collecting the money would cost more than it would raise.

CBO Estimates Cost of Extending Part D Initial Enrollment Period

On May 1, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) sent a letter to Rep. Fortney H. "Pete" Stark (D-Calif.) with its estimate of the budgetary impact of extending the initial enrollment period for the Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit. CBO estimates that extending the May 15 deadline through December 31, 2006, would increase Medicare outlays, net of premiums, by \$100 million in 2006 and \$3.4 billion during 2006-2016. According to CBO, "The increase in outlays would occur because the extension would reduce offsetting receipts from payments of late-enrollment penalties. Once the May 15 deadline passes, the next opportunity to enroll for individuals who are already eligible will be between November 15 and December 31 of this year, with any new coverage taking effect on January 1, 2007." The CBO letter is available at <http://www.cbo.gov/showdoc.cfm?index=7194&sequence=0&from=7>.

CMS Hosts Medicaid IT Systems Industry Conference

On May 8 and 9, CMS hosted the Medicaid Information Technology Architecture (MITA) Summit for vendors in Baltimore. CMS addressed the systems infrastructure and the framework within MITA 2.0 that states can utilize to design, develop, or modify their own business, information, and technical architecture. States will receive 90 percent federal financial participation (FFP) for system design and development and 75 percent FFP for operations. On the second day of the summit, Dennis Smith, director of the CMS Center for Medicaid and State Operations, addressed the vendors and said systems that are built should be flexible to meet demands as needs change. Medicaid information systems should incorporate health information technology; be adaptable to handle state benefit flexibility packages; address system delays by identifying problems on the front end; and be utilized to help states institute a strategic Medicaid program integrity plan.

States must perform self-assessment of their Medicaid information systems by reviewing their strategic goals, objectives, and current ability to execute a business process. Subsequent to the state self-assessment, the state can develop a list of capabilities it plans to use to meet its strategic goals and objectives. CMS expects MITA to act as the framework for states to use for reviewing the effectiveness of their systems and changes needed. According to CMS, the benefits of MITA to the states include improved return on state information technology investment; improvements in the management of the Medicaid program; and information technology alignment with Medicaid priorities. States have differing needs and are likely to begin their participation at different points. The full MITA 2.0 Framework document is available at http://www.cms.hhs.gov/MedicaidInfoTechArch/04_MITAFramework.asp.

SSBG Annual Report Released

The Administration for Children and Families Office of Community Services has released the Social

Services Block Grant Annual Report for 2004. The report shows that states supplemented the \$1.7 billion block grant with over \$2.5 billion from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. The report highlights various state planning processes for the SSBG allotment as well as service expenditures and recipients. In particular, states used close to 30% of the block grant nationally for such child welfare services as foster care, child protection, case management, adoption and independent living services. States used more than \$336 million alone for special services for persons with disabilities. A full copy of the report that includes individual state reporting forms can be found at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/ssbg/docs/reports.html>.

FNS Seeks 2006 Hunger Champions Nominations

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is seeking nominations for the 2006 Hunger Champion awards. This program honors local offices that provide exemplary service in helping eligible clients to obtain FSP benefits. The goal of the program is to recognize and support those local offices with FSP professionals who embrace the program's mission to "increase food security and to reduce hunger by providing children and low-income people with food, a healthy diet and nutrition education." Local offices with a unique and creative approach to serving their clients will be selected as the 2006 Hunger Champions. Awardees will be acknowledged at the 2006 annual conference of the American Association of Food Stamp Directors, an APHSA affiliate. FNS will recognize all Hunger Champions nominees with a certificate noting their effort and commitment. In addition, all nominees will be listed as exemplary offices on the FNS web site. A nomination form and other details are available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/champions.htm>.